

# The earth moves, so will lighthouse

154-year-old Gurnet landmark sits on eroding beach bluff

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PLYMOUTH — It's survived wind, water and fire, but the earth threatens the 154-year-old Gurnet Light. The bluff on which the lighthouse stands at the end of Gurnet Point is eroding. The Coast Guard plans to move the wooden lighthouse inland in the fall.

"It will be in every single way exactly the way it is now, except for a new foundation and safely inland," said Gene Negretti, chief of the Coast Guard's signal man-

agement program in Boston. "It's less expensive and better to move it now while we still have land around it. We want to plan and not wait for a panic situation."

Recent winter storms sped the rate of erosion on the point forming the northern edge of Plymouth/Duxbury Bay. The 21-foot lighthouse building stands safely approximately 50 feet from the edge of the bluff now. The Coast Guard doesn't want to take chances with the historic building.

According to a recent survey of coastal erosion done by the state's office of coastal zone management, the coastline in Plymouth has eroded an average of a third of a foot a year since the mid-1880s. Some areas accrete sand, others remain stable. The Gurnet in recent history has lost as much as

two feet a year.

The new site lies 140 feet inland, still high enough on the bluff to shine on every point the light reaches now.

"It wouldn't do us much good as a lighthouse if you couldn't see it," Negretti said.

Other than its scenic and historic significance, the lighthouse beacon doesn't actually do much good any more. The ancient technology was overtaken by radio beacons which were then made obsolete by the Coast Guard's digital global positioning system. The positioning system uses a series of satellites in communication with automated stations on the ground. Lighthouses shelter some of those stations, but they're not the ideal structure for

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the job.

"We could put the electronic gear in a fiberglass hut at the bottom of a steel tower and save the taxpayers hundreds and hundreds of thousands of dollars," Negretti said. "Lighthouses have outlived their purpose as practical aids to navigation."

But as long as mariners in small boats venture onto the ocean, the Coast Guard has a responsibility to help them not get into too much trouble. So it will continue to maintain the Gurnet Light.

The Gurnet Light does not house a global positioning station. It no longer has a live operator. Electronics and machinery run the beacon and its fog horn.

"There's no positioning system at the Gurnet, it's just an automated light," said Capt. Bill Batson, chief of the aids to navigation branch for the Coast Guard First District in Boston. "People say, 'Gee this is like throwing good money after bad to move it and keep it in operation.' But we're still obliged to provide aids to navigation to even the smallest mariner until the new technology is affordable and in the hands of every mariner."

Lighthouse preservationists also want the antiques to stay. So the Coast Guard moves them out of harm's way.

Last year the Coast Guard moved Highland Light in North Truro and Nauset Light in Eastham. Both were much greater engineering challenges.

"We have some experience with it," Batson said. "The light at the Gurnet is much smaller than the others we've had to move. Also, its construction is wood. It's much lighter and easier to move."

It's a post-and-beam structure, like a small circular barn. The Coast Guard's engineering division anticipates no problems moving the building. It moved the other two larger, heavier lights 450 and 300 feet inland.

"If we can do it with big concrete and stone buildings at greater distances, we can do it with a small wooden building," Negretti said.

The Gurnet Light is listed on the National Register of Historic Sites for more reason than its age. It had the country's first woman lightkeeper. During the Revolution, its predecessor on the site was hit by cannon fire. It later burned down. The current structure had a twin when it was built in 1843. The dual beacons gave the entrance to Plymouth Harbor a distinctive signature. The Coast Guard tore down the Gurnet's twin lighthouse in 1924.

Gurnet Light's greatest distinction lies in its construction. It's one of the few surviving wooden lighthouses in the country — they tended to burn.

With the help of the Army Corps of Engineers and private contractors, the Coast Guard hopes to move the lighthouse by the fall. The exact date depends on how long the federally mandated bidding process takes.